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Canyon Cinema: Big New Showing Of Films

By Calvin Ahlgren

THE ORIGINS of Canyon Cinema go back to a surplus screen stretched over a board frame in the rustic East Bay community of Canyon almost 20 years ago. Filmmaker Bruce Baillie, with some help, got Canyon underway as a simple vehicle for screening independent films of his own and of fellow cineastes who inhabited the Bay Area at the time.

From its modest beginnings, CC moved ahead to screenings in Berkeley, then a few years later to Intersection's Union Street building in San Francisco, and latterly, to the present headquarters on Third Street near China Basin. Along the way, it organized as a filmmakers' co-operative, with the intent of gathering and distributing a collection of interesting films.

The approach of independent film is not to rival Hollywood — where massive resources fund films aimed



By Peter Breinig

DOMINIQUE ANGERAME, MICHAEL WALLIN

at the widest possible audience — but to investigate other possibilities in a medium whose limits depend less on finance than on adventures of the mind and spirit. The independent cinema genre is to Hollywood as hang-gliders are to jumbo jets: both carry humans through the air, but there the similarity is lost in space.

Canyon is nothing earthshaking — a collection of some 1500 films by more than 250 members — but it is one of the most effective organizations of its kind, the West Coast's largest and perhaps most cohesive distributor of independent films. It has maintained a light against the darkness of financial pressures (though it nearly folded in the mid-'70s) and provided a bastion of creative determination in a time when screenings most often take place in university settings. From its count of 40 films by 25 filmmakers in 1966, Canyon has grown to its present, relatively grandiose stature, and, in the hands of its current managers, is looking bullish.

Filmmakers Dominique Angerame, 31, and Michael Wallin, 33, the principal movers of Canyon at present, are in the process of putting out a new catalogue of the co-op's offerings, with the aid of a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts; the last catalogue was published in 1976, with supplements in '79 and '80. This

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The Cinematheque, 800 Chestnut Street, will show two two-hour programs of new films in a Tribute to Canyon Cinema, this Friday and Saturday at 8 p.m.

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Canyon Cinema

Continued From Page 32

Friday and Saturday, Cinematheque will offer a Tribute to Canyon, screening two hours of new film each night from the Canyon lists.

"Many of them are by the masters of the independent cinema," said Wallin, winner of two awards at this year's San Francisco Art Institute Film Festival and a teacher of film at California College of Arts and Crafts. After the waning of the genre in the latter end of the '60s, he noted, "There seems to be a new resurgence of independent film. It's come about partially at least through the New Wave thing," which he said involves "a certain critique of the social and political scene, very anarchistic." The excitement stems from New Wave bands, not revolutionary film techniques. Films such as Graeme Whiffler's "Hello, Skinny," with the music of the ineffable Residents, or "Jinx," backed by Tuxedomoon's waxy saxs, are interesting both visually and on account of their quirky wit.

Those two are among the variety offerings in Canyon's tribute. They are mixed in with very different types of products, such as recent works by minimalist Stan Brakhage, a purist whose films demand attention and, often, leaps of faith on the parts of viewers; Mike Kuchar's "Idyll," a brief black-and-white study of a figure against foggy, windy landscapes; Robert Fulton's "Path of Cessation," making a transition from a static study of a Nepalese courtyard to a swirling collage of exotic overlays; Will Hindle's graceful, playful "Pasteur Cubed," Robert Breer's "Rubber Cement" and others.

VISUALLY, "Rubber Cement" plays lightly against a theme, in a relaxed but formal treatment that hops about pleasantly with a collage sound track accompanying. Sketching ideas and associations, the film exemplifies some of the joys of its genre. The eye gets to have a story which does not necessarily engage the narrative faculties; the logic works in images, and the mind can play off that as it wishes. As a medium, film is related not only to theater, with its grounding in storytelling, but also to painting, which a viewer can appreciate with his or her senses regardless of the desire to make sense.

"We want to bring (Canyon) into the '80s, shedding the albatross of being seen as a bunch of disorganized hippies," Wallin continued. "We're trying to streamline the organization and make it just as viable for new filmmakers today as it was in the '60s — because it's just as important for new people."

Angerame added: "Most major distributors won't even accept new filmmakers' work. Essentially, we accept everything; all you have to do is pay the yearly dues (about \$13). And a filmmaker sets his own conditions for distribution." In addition, the nonprofit Canyon offers filmmakers a generous 65 percent of the rental fee — a boon to the artists, though it makes the classic struggle for survival a regular part of Canyon's regimen.

"Our biggest handicap," Angerame said, "is that we don't advertise; there's no budget. The main reason I think Canyon has existed for so long is word-of-mouth. What we try to do at Canyon is keep the public posted as to what's new."

THE PEOPLE who have worked at Canyon have been filmmakers; they've been dedicated; they know the problems of filmmakers' surviving in a world where (most) people don't want to see your work. I lived in Chicago for 10 years (where he took his BA in filmmaking at the Chicago Art Institute) and watched the whole scene fall apart. It's starting to build itself up again there, but the odds are formidable. We're (Canyon) actually in the black now: a solvent company. But I've watched it build...

In the Midwest, the independent film scene is coordinated largely through the Chicago Art Institute, which has numerous filmmakers on its teaching staff, and an organization called Chicago Filmmakers, Angerame said. There is no major unaffiliated distributor. New York has the Filmmakers' Cooperative, with no yearly dues and thus, no income or regular catalogue offerings.

At Canyon, Wallin said, "it's amazing how many films we're starting to rent to very, very tiny schools (small colleges in the South, the Midwest and elsewhere). Even if our volume of rentals isn't growing that rapidly, our outreach is. It's a very positive indication."

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Tribute to Avant-Garde Film Maker

Going to Strange Places With William Burroughs

BY JOHN STANLEY

CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

"WILLIAM Burroughs' mind is not a pretty place," critic Richard Hall wrote, in trying to describe the "outlaw" of literature. "It is ghoulish, paranoid, cold. A place of dead roads." Burroughs' "gray room" (his own personal term for one's mind) is not pretty because the onetime heroin addict — who became a literary *cause célèbre* in 1959 with the publication of "Naked Lunch" — writes in a fragmented, nihilistic, surreal, satirical style, always with an air of moral decay. There are times when he's hysterically funny with morbid overtones.

His world is a sleazy carnival of lowlife Bohemians, homosexuals, drug addicts and frail, pale, gaunt people — the latter an exact image of Burroughs himself.

While Burroughs, once considered the dean of the Beat Generation, and continuously the darling of whatever counterculture movement is afoot, is known for such mordant works as "Junky," "Queer" and "The Wild Boys," his occasional contributions to film (as an inspiration and/or an actor)

Cinematheque will present "A Tribute to William S. Burroughs" at 8 tonight at the San Francisco Art Institute, 800 Chestnut Street.

have been largely avant-garde and hence unknown to all but a select few.

So esoteric, in fact, that a Bay Area Burroughs admirer, film maker Michael Wallin, has culled the archives of obscurity and packaged seven short films, some featuring Burroughs on camera, all of

Burroughs' world is a sleazy carnival

them reflecting his philosophies and literary techniques. "A Tribute to William S. Burroughs," a decidedly eccentric package, will be screened at 8 tonight at the San Francisco Art Institute as a Cinematheque program.

WALLIN himself belongs to the film world of the arcane, having made a series of experimental, expressionistic shorts since his graduation from San Francisco State in 1976 with a degree in film. His once-slight profile rapidly is becoming prominent, as his films will be featured in a retrospective next month at the New York Museum of Modern Art. His "Decoding" (whose inspiration he attributes to Burroughs) has won numerous awards, including a special jury honor at last year's San Francisco Film Festival and the grand prize

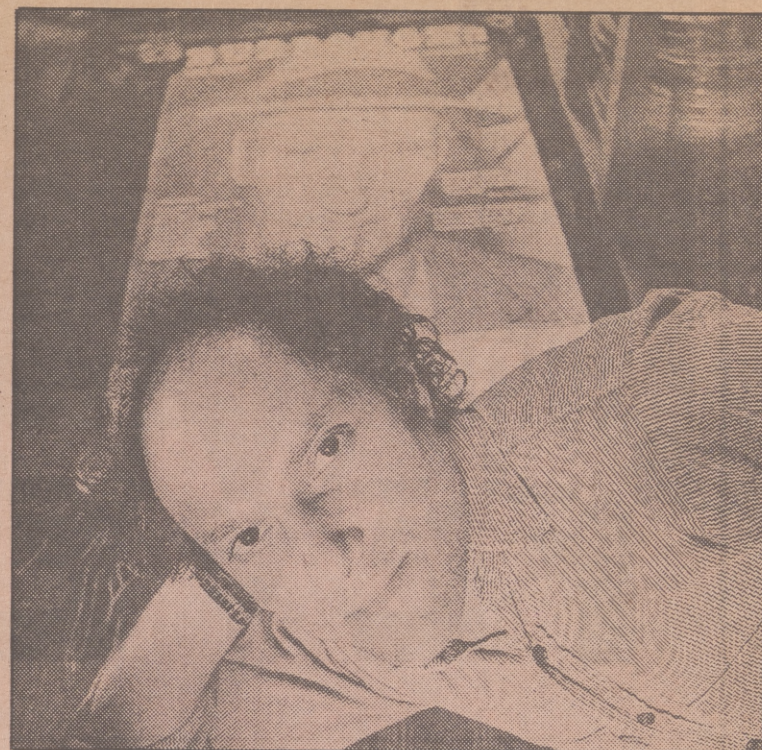
at the Thomas Edison Black Maria Film Festival, the largest festival of its type for short independent films.

"I discovered Burroughs when I was 16, and did it ever change my life," Wallin recalls. "His writing conveyed an incredible range of life experience, and that can have a profound effect on someone so young. Burroughs works on so many levels: satire, hallucinatory, science-fiction and fantasy, intellectual exposition of theory. Never linear, no psychology or character development. His prose has always been very cinematic. You can smell the colors and feel the foreign places where he's lived.

"His images have no connectors. I mean, he often strings phrases together, without pronouns and verbs, like the edited images of a film. He uses film terminology. 'Cut' or 'Cut to.' There are all kinds of cinematic allusions in his work."

Wallin has met Burroughs on many occasions and describes him as "very dignified, always wearing a nicely tailored suit, warm, sweet, gentle. There's no sense of a great ego for someone of his stature. It's amazing that he was a heroin addict for 15 years, recovered and is alive and thriving at 76."

Wallin believes that, because of the visual strength of Burroughs' prose, it was a natural step for the



Film maker Michael Wallin, with poster of Burroughs in background

author to work with various film makers through the years. "The films I've picked," he elaborates, "are collaborations between film makers and Burroughs on various levels." In some cases he's an actor, but in all cases you can see Burroughs' literary ideas being translated into visual and audio concepts.

The slickest of the seven short subjects being screened tonight is by Gus Van Sant, who broke into mainstream films last year with the excellent Matt Dillon vehicle about drug addiction, "Drugstore Cowboy." His "Discipline of D.E." is based on a short story from the collection "Exterminator!" D.E. stands for "doing easy," the theory

that one can accomplish more in life by always taking the easy way. The film is a fanciful visualization of Burroughs' text, and includes a showdown between two gunslingers in a cowtown saloon.

"Towers Open Fire" (1963) is a collaboration of satirical science-fiction with British director Anthony Balch ("Horror Hospital," among others), who first met Burroughs during the beatnik days in Paris. According to Wallin, Balch mainly earned his living by buying the rights to European soft-core pornography movies and distributing them in England.

"Towers" has been described as

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Cinematheque Screenings This Sunday

Tribute to an Eminent Satirist

by Daniel Mangin

"His work was a window into an entirely alternate universe, at once incredibly compelling, in terms of homoeroticism — to use that once again loaded word — but he's also an eminent satirist of the American scene," says local filmmaker Michael Wallin, (*Decodings; The Place Between Our Bodies*) who put together Sunday night's San Francisco Cinematheque tribute to writer William Burroughs.

The author, recently turned 76, is perhaps best known for his novels *Naked Lunch*, *Queer* and *Junkie*, but has also collaborated with numerous artists on projects in various media. "He's been a hero of mine since high school — he turned my life around," Wallin said in a chat last week about the genesis of the Cinematheque program.

"He creates fantastic sexual tableaux. But also his humor cuts through traditional notions of authority and order. All of it stimulated some latent parts of my artistic sensibility."

"He creates fantastic sexual tableaux. But also his humor cuts through traditional notions of authority and order."

Wallin's tribute is a sampling from some of the films in which Burroughs has been either an actor or subject. Among them are: *Discipline of D.E.*, a work Wallin calls a "spare, elegant and witty" retelling by *Drugstore Cowboy* director Gus Van Sant of Burroughs' account of "Do Easy," a "Zen-like, economical approach to confrontation with objects in one's everyday world"; Robert Frank's *Energy and How to Get It*, a film about inventor Robert Golka, in which Burroughs plays The Energy Czar; and *Burroughs on Bowery*, a Marc Olmsted portrait of Burroughs made from super-8 footage of the author.

Cinematic Allusions

Burroughs alludes to cinema in his writing says Wallin. Asked what are the specific cinematic elements in the work of a writer not overly concerned with linear thought progression, the filmmaker replies that the similarities to the cinema exist "not necessarily in terms of Hollywood product, but certainly as regards experimental film."

"His work is so rich in evocative images, giving you the feeling of 'touching' texture, 'smelling' smells and experiencing other sensory stimuli, without any of the 'connectors,' verbs, et cetera, that put 'logic' into a narrative."

"He puts images together probably more like the way our brain works, one random image after another, that later are formed into a whole."

Burroughs' sense of humor is "truly exquisite," Wallin says. "He's able to parody perfectly various bits of Americana, from southern rednecks to politicians to drunk doctors like Dr. Benway in an early Burroughs 'routine' called 'Gave Proof Through the Night' that first appeared in *Nova Express*."

Wallin is particularly pleased to be able to include the works of Anthony Balch in the tribute. Balch's films *Towers Open Fire* and *The Cut-Ups* represent two early 1960s attempts, successful ones says Wallin, to create a sense of Burroughs' writing style in cinema — "quick cutting, repetition of imagery and sound, the use of trick cinematic devices to generate a stylistic corollary to his writing."

Balch's films (the program also includes that filmmaker's *Bill and Tony* and *William Buys a Parrot* in addition to *Tower* and *The Cut-Ups*) also convey some of Burroughs' notions about how words are used to assert political control.

Incredibly Prescient

"Burroughs was incredibly prescient," Wallin says. "He pointed out early on how words are used to control thought, to provoke an instant response. In his own work he cut word lines in order to subvert our linear way of thinking, the latter being the way in which politicians or the purveyors of consumerism exert control over us, Burroughs believes."

For Burroughs, says Wallin, shooting drugs is the "ultimate metaphor for control. At that time it's clear at least what the source of control is, and who is dependent on whom."

Burroughs develops this notion quite precisely in *Naked Lunch*:

Junk is the mold of monopoly and possession.... Junk is the ideal product, the ultimate merchandise. No sales talk necessary. The client will crawl through a sewer and beg to buy. The junk merchant does not sell the product to his consumer, he sells the consumer to his product.... Junk yields a basic formula of 'Evil' Virus: The Algebra of Need. The face of evil is always the face of total need. A dope fiend is a man in need of total dope. Beyond a certain frequency, need knows absolutely no limit or control.

Balch's *Towers Open Fire* is, said *Cinema Rising* magazine



William Burroughs, seen here in a still from the film *Drugstore Cowboy*, has appeared in a number of films.

at the time of its release, "a straightforward attempt to find a cinematic equivalent for William Burroughs' writing." The 11-minute collage contains all the "key themes and situations" in Burroughs' books, with the author providing a soundtrack narration:

"Society crumbles as the Stock Exchange collapses, members of the Board are ray-gun zapped in their own boardroom and a commando in the orgasm attack leaps through a window. Burroughs as junkie breaks on through to the

hallucinatory world of the Brion Gysin Dream Machine."

Artist Gysin's "Dream Machine," as described in Ted Morgan's *Literary Outlaw: The Life and Times of William S. Burroughs*, was a "cylinder with slits that revolved on a phonograph turntable and produced, lit from the inside, alpha waves corresponding to 13 flashes per second, which hit the optic nerve in such a way that they induced visions."

Gysin produced the machine while in Paris, where three of

the four Balch films in the Cinematheque program were shot. Burroughs, enamored of the machine, tried to sell it to cosmetics maven Helena Rubenstein, who was intrigued, but wanted one in white instead of black. She put one in her shop in Paris, but never bought it, and the artist later retrieved it. (Art collector Peggy Guggenheim, whose curiosity was piqued during a Burroughs visit to Venice, was talked out of buying a Dream Machine by the Museum of Modern Art's Alfred Barr, who said that the kinetic phase "had passed.")

Balch's *The Cut-Ups* is, Wallin says, a "pure experimental film, whereas *Towers* is more a cinematic expression of Burroughs' ideas." In *The Cut-Ups*, Balch repeats a series of images one after another and intercuts them with various sounds and in various orders. The effect achieved is that of an endless repetition that after a point strips away the viewer's usual associations with them.

There is a theme to Burroughs' work and life that underlies the films in Wallin's tribute. Burroughs was greatly influenced by the 11th century figure Hassan I Sabbah, a contemporary of Omar Khayyam known as "the old man of the mountain." Sabbah was a religious agitator who lived, as has Burroughs, by this simple maxim: "Nothing is true, everything is permitted."

Editor's note: The San Francisco Cinematheque tribute to William Burroughs will begin at 8 p.m., April 29, at the San Francisco Art Institute, 800 Chestnut St. Admission is \$5 general, \$3 for students, seniors and the disabled. For more information phone 558-8129.

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